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(De-)personalization of mediated political communication: Comparative analysis of Yugoslavia, Croatia and the UK from 1945 to 2015

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the personalization of mediated political communication developed since 1945 in an authoritarian, transitional, and established democratic system. Findings from a longitudinal content analysis of Yugoslav (authoritarian) and Croatian (transitional) daily newspapers are compared with those from Langer's (2011) study of personalization in the United Kingdom (established democracy). The comparison of the data related to the personalized media reporting from Yugoslavia and Croatia with that from the UK shows that the trends observed in the transitional context are counter to the existing personalization scholarship and that they run in the opposite direction from trends found in established democracies. Consequently, two new theories are formed that may help explain the personalization trends in transitional societies. These are continuation theory and democratization theory.

Key words

Personalization, content analysis, democratization, comparative research, political communication

Introduction

Following de Vreese et al. (2017) analysis of political journalism across 14 European democracies, there is little doubt left that mediated political communication across Europe is

focused on politicians, i.e. individual political actors, while political parties seem to have been given a back seat in contemporary media reporting. Specifically, their study demonstrates that person-centred political reporting is a characteristic of contemporary Western, Southern and Northern European media since in all 14 examined countries individual political actors were more media visible than political parties in 2012 when the analysis was conducted (de Vreese et al., 2017). While this study undoubtedly represents the most comprehensive and up-to-date overview of personalized reporting in Europe, it is important to note that none of the transitional European democracies, Central Eastern European countries formed after the fall of communism in 1990s, were included in the analysis.

Debates about what is personalization, how to conceptualize it, and how to research it, have been among the most popular in the field of political communication in the past decade. What has been more or less agreed upon is that the personalization, or at least one of its dimensions, is concerned with the increasing focus that political communication actors put on individuals at the expense of collectives and institutions (e.g. Bjerling, 2012; Langer, 2011; Maier and Adam, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). In other words, personalization of mediated political communication can be understood as a process by which individual political actors, particularly political leaders, are becoming more prominent in media reporting, while political collectives, such as parties and governments, are losing their media visibility. While de Vreese et al. (2017) study shows that contemporary European journalism is characterized by personalized reporting, there is also a growing body of evidence that this is a relatively new trend since the reporting in the past was less focused on individual politicians and more on political collectives, at least in the established (Western) democracies in which this kind of longitudinal research has mostly been carried out (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Langer, 2011; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013).

The aim of this article is to provide a different perspective on the personalization phenomenon – that from an authoritarian and transitional context. The lack of scholarly interest in the personalized political communication in authoritarian and transitional societies is surprising, given the negative consequences that this phenomenon might have for democratic and societal processes. They may be even more pronounced than in established Western democracies, with which most of personalization scholarship deals with (for overviews of personalization theory and research see Maier and Adam, 2010 and Van Aelst et al., 2011). Specifically, the focus on individual political actors at the expense of political collectives and institutions in authoritarian and transitional societies may position political leaders as the greatest authorities in a society and consequently, may void political institutions of significance and legitimacy (Schöpflin, 1993). This development may lead to the rise of the clientelistic society, inhibit the development of strong institutions and party system, and threaten the process of democratic transition.

Another reason why it might be worthwhile to look at the personalization of mediated political communication in these contexts is the fact that the communist leadership cult literature, and that concerned with democratic transitions, suggests that the media reporting in these systems were always centred on political leaders at the expense of political collectives and issues. If this was to be proven, it would mean that the mainstream personalization scholarship lacks the power to explain effects, causes and trends of the personalization of political communication in these authoritarian and transitional contexts. In other words, the existing personalization scholarship would not be able to account for personalized political communication, its causes, effects and trends over time, in systems in which the focus was arguably on individuals from the very start, examples of which might be European communist and post-communist systems.

Consequently, this article will empirically explore two main assumptions. First, that authoritarian, communist and transitional, post-communist mediated political communication was and still is significantly personalized. And, second, that the personalized mediated political communication in an authoritarian, communist system and transitional, post-communist system, develops in a different way than the mainstream personalization scholarship would suggest.

Leadership cults

The scholarship concerned with communist regimes usually describes the ways in which politics was conducted and communicated by the term *leadership cult* or *personality cult*, which can be defined as a ‘god-like glorification of a modern political leader with mass medial techniques’ (Plamper, 2004: 33). All leaders of European communist countries after the World War II developed personality cults, but to differing degrees (Leese, 2014). The underlying logic behind the leadership cult theory is that the leader was the central actor in political communication, and politics in general, of a communist regime. The centrality of a leader in the new system was considered a necessity since it was the only way of legitimizing the new system given that the party was not yet organized and established (Ake, 1966). In line with what the communist party saw as its main purposes in the society, education and socialization, the leader was also used as a means of simplifying values, beliefs and behaviours for the, in large part, uneducated public. The leader was to set the example of how people should behave, what they should value and what their interests should be. It is argued that the mass media played a pivotal role in the building of the cult, so it is to be expected that communist media put significant emphasis on the leader in their reporting.

However, it should be noted that there is an alternative theory of the communist media reporting practices. Galtung and Ruge (1965), writing in the period of Cold War, suggested that

the communist media might pursue a more 'structural' way of reporting news which is characterized by the emphasis on social forces while 'the names of the actors' simply disappear (p. 68). At the same time, they argued that personalized reporting in which the focus is put on individuals at the expense of structures and collectives might be a news value of Western media.

The evidence for either of these theories, i.e. leader-centred reporting promoted by leadership cult literature or structure-centred reporting suggested by Galtung and Ruge (1965) is limited and inconclusive. For example, analysis in 1960s found that Soviet newspapers pursued quite person-centred, rather than structural reporting style (cited in Galtung and Ruge 1965: 87), while a study of Vietnam war coverage concluded that the Associated Press' reporting was far more person-centred than that in the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug (Robinson, 1977).

Continuation of personalized reporting?

How, if at all, the news values and reporting style changed during the democratic transition from an authoritarian, communist to a transitional, post-communist system, is unclear. The literature concerned with media change in European post-communist countries is mostly concerned with media's freedom and independence, deregulation of media markets and the nature of interactions between political elite and journalists. Little is known about the news values and reporting style, although it is frequently suggested that post-communist media have started publishing sensationalist, trivialized and personalized news after the introduction of democracy (Gulyas, 1998; Lauk, 2008; Splichal, 2001; Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck, 2002). There is, however, little empirical evidence that would support these claims. In spite of this, the potential focus on political leaders can be examined through the theories of *continuation*, *modernization* and *Americanization*.

In the first place, the focus on individuals as a news value in the transitional, post-communist media might be seen as a *continuation* of personalized reporting from the communist era. That is, if the reporting was personalized in communism. Journalists educated and socialized in the communist system did not start working in the new system as a *tabula rasa* but rather they transferred their news values and reporting styles from the former system. Most frequently mentioned in this context are tendencies toward propagandistic writing, commentary instead of facts and advocacy as opposed to objective journalism (Coman, 2000; Lauk, 2008). What is, however, more important for the purpose of this paper is the possible continuity in the focus on the leader as an individual, if the communist media were pursuing this personalized rather than structural reporting style. If the communist journalists were, as some literature indicates, emphasizing the leader in reporting, then it might be expected that they transferred this reporting style to post-communist period, at least in its early days. The literature related to democratic transitions also lends some support to the hypothesis of *continuation* of personalized media reporting. It is argued that politics remained focused on political leaders in the early post-communist period, due to the weakness of the newly formed parties, low party identification, uncertainty about voters' needs and interests, institutional designs that granted more power to individuals, and so on (Kitschelt, 1995; Lewis, 2000; Tomšič and Prijon, 2010). Furthermore, it is argued that in most European post-communist countries the political elite retained control over, at least some, media and was able to use the media as an unobstructed channel of communication to the voters (Gross, 2004; Splichal, 2001). Hence, it might be expected that if the political elite was pursuing personalized communication, media reporting was personalized as well, at least while the elite remained in control over the media.

In the second place, if the communist media considered structures and processes as news values, and personalized reporting became a news value in the post-communist period, this

development might be seen as a result of changes in the country's media and political system. If the changes in the news values and presentational style were caused by conditions such as the introduction of the free market, media deregulation, rise of commercial media, and so on, which arguably made media focus on individuals to be more competitive, then the consequent increase in personalization in media reporting can be seen as an outcome of *modernization* processes. In other words, the increased media focus on individual political actors and their personae can be seen as an outcome of the changes which the societies have gone through (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Hence, it might be argued that once these post-communist societies experienced changes in their media and political systems, the political communication actors started pursuing the same communication practices as their Western counterparts. That is, they started considering individuals to be important and newsworthy actors, and consequently they started personalizing their communication.

Finally, some scholars suggest that the personalized reporting style did not develop in post-communist countries as a result of modernization processes, but rather that these countries 'adopted 'Americanized' style of reporting' (Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck, 2002: 21). In this way the rise of importance of individuals as a news value is seen as a trend imported from Western countries, among which the United States is most frequently mentioned as a centre from which modern trends in political communication are disseminated (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Therefore, the *Americanization* hypothesis in this context would suggest that the news values and trends in media reporting of post-communist countries have been imported from the United States, that is, that the transitional media started pursuing personalized reporting by imitating news values and practices from the United States.

A more nuanced approach to this export-import model is that which considers national political communication trends to be a combination of trends imported from other countries, not

necessarily the United States, and traditional communication practices. Examples of these models are *hybrid* and *shopping* models (Plasser, 2000, 2002). According to these theories, the rise in importance of persons as a news value in post-communist countries would be seen as an adapted imitation of news values and practices from other, mostly Western, countries. However, which news values post-communist media followed, how they affected their reporting styles and which theory is best suited to explain the development of news values and reporting practices in this context, remains unclear.

In sum, while the mainstream personalization theory suggests that the mediated political communication is nowadays more personalized than was the case before, based on the literature concerning communist leadership cults and democratic transitions, one might speculate that the media reporting in these systems was always personalized and continues to be so. Consequently, the main research question to be asked in this article is as follows: What are the similarities and differences in the ways in which the personalization of mediated political communication develops over time in an authoritarian communist system, a transitional post-communist democracy, and an established democracy? The aim of this study is to empirically explore the notion that mediated political communication is *more personalized* in a communist system than in any other, and that a high degree of personalized political communication has continued into the post-communist era.

The UK v Yugoslavia and Croatia: Personalization v continuity?

In order to compare the ways in which personalized media reporting develops in authoritarian, transitional, and established democratic system, this exploratory analysis focuses on the personalized media reporting in the communist Yugoslavia, one of its successors, young democracy Republic of Croatia and the United Kingdom. The assumptions about the ways in

which personalized media reporting developed in these three countries, but also some empirical evidence, suggests that comparison of the United Kingdom, Yugoslav and Croatian reporting might reveal important differences in the ways in which personalization trends develop in these three contexts.

The United Kingdom is taken as a representative of an established democracy for three main reasons. First, the United Kingdom is one of the oldest European democracies and it can be considered relatively stable in the post-war period in comparison to transitional societies. Second, it has a parliamentary system which is considered to be less prone to the process of personalization than a presidential system (see, for example, Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Hence, the United Kingdom may illustrate an ‘average’ case of personalization among established democracies as it could be expected that parties continuously play an important role in public discourse, although their role may have weakened over the past few decades. And third, it has long been assumed that its media reporting has become personalized over time, and there is considerable empirical evidence that this has actually happened (Boumans et al., 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Langer, 2011; den Herder, 2013). Hence, the United Kingdom is a great example of a country in which personalized reporting seems to develop exactly as the mainstream personalization scholarship suggests, and can consequently serve as a benchmark for exploring trends in other contexts.

The reporting of the UK media is compared with that from Yugoslav and Croatian media, which are taken as representatives of authoritarian, communist and transitional, post-communist countries, since there are indications that reporting in these systems was and remains personalized. In the first place, it can be assumed that the Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito, represents an ideal example of the extreme form of personalized mediated leadership. As Carmichael (2010) writes: ‘His personal charm and political intuition helped to inspire a huge

personality cult which still survives in pockets across the region' (p. 1045). Combined with the assumption that communist leaders dominated political communication in their countries (Apor et al., 2004) and that in the case of Tito this was for an unusually long time¹, it might be logical to assume that media reporting in communist Yugoslavia was personalized.

Secondly, unlike other transitional democracies of Central Europe, Croatia, one of the new democracies formed after the break-up of Yugoslavia, showed in the early transitional period a preference for institutional arrangements which increase the focus on individual political actors (Easter, 1997). In addition, the first post-communist period is said to have been marked by the presidency of Franjo Tuđman (Jović and Lamont, 2010). Hence, in the early transitional period certain continuities from the communist era can be observed with regard to the centrality of political leaders to political processes and communication. This could indicate that some continuity may also be visible in the ways in which mediated political communication was personalized.

However, in the second decade following the transition Croatia introduced institutional arrangements which decreased the degree of personalized power (parliamentary political system and proportional electoral system; Ilišin, 2001), the indexes of press freedom showed that the country's media moved towards being more autonomous (Freedom House, 2013), and the media system underwent a process of commercialization and tabloidization (Bilić and Švob-Đokić, 2016; Skoko and Bajš, 2007). Given that personalized reporting is commonly associated with commercial media (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Voltmer, 2008), it may be expected that this transitional media system with strong commercial outlets have retained its focus on individual politicians at the expense of political collectives, and in that sense continued with the practice of personalized reporting, albeit from different reasons than in the past. Consequently, Yugoslav and Croatian case seem well suited for exploring the theory of *continuation*.

In short, the reporting in the United Kingdom is compared to that in Yugoslavia and Croatia because it can be expected, based on the existing literature, that personalized reporting developed in diverse ways in these three countries, with Yugoslav and Croatian case showing potential for examination of the *continuation* theory.

Methodology

The study starts in 1945 - following the end of the Second World War, the creation of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Tito's ascent to power - and ends in 2015. It focuses on the media portrayal of the heads of the executive in Yugoslavia, Croatia and the United Kingdom, focusing on every head of the executive who was in power for longer than 3 years. Hence, in Yugoslav and Croatian case it starts with Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and ends with Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, while in the British case it starts with the first post-war Prime Minister Clement Attlee and ends with David Cameron. The decision to focus on the heads of the executive, that is, the most powerful individual political actors, rather than a particular type of a political actor (e.g. President, Prime Minister), was necessary for ensuring comparability between analysed actors within each country, and also comparatively, since there were several changes of political system types in the observed authoritarian and transitional case which led to changes in the political positions that most powerful political actors held. Hence, while British case focuses only on Prime Ministers, the Yugoslav/Croatian sample consists of two Presidents, Josip Broz Tito and Franjo Tuđman and four Prime Ministers who came to power after 2000 when Croatia transformed into a parliamentary democracy and Prime Ministers became heads of the executive, that is, the most powerful political individuals.

The analysis is done on daily newspapers, with an article being the unit of analysis. While personalized reporting is often associated with, and arguably could be most manifest in,

television reporting (McAllister, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005), the analysis of personalization in print media should show just how pervasive the trend actually is. In other words, if it is expected that media reporting became, or remained, personalized, then the trends should be manifested across media also, and not only in television reporting.

The data for British Prime Ministers from Attlee to Brown is based on Langer (2011), and updated with the information gathered for David Cameron who came to power in 2010. All data for Yugoslav and Croatian heads of the executive have been gathered by primary analysis. The data related to the media portrayal of British heads of the executive was collected by the analysis of the daily quality paper *The Times* (Langer, 2011). While *The Times* is not representative of the British media, it is considered the newspaper of record, and as such its coverage ‘cannot be regarded as an isolated anomaly but rather as symptomatic of broader changes in the nature of political coverage, the Prime Ministerial office and politics more generally’ (Langer, 2007: 374). In Yugoslav and Croatian case three different daily newspapers were studied in order to get a wider overview of the personalization practices in the print market. These are state-owned *Vjesnik*, daily that was closest to being a quality paper until it ceased publication in 2012 (Jergović, 2004; Novak, 2005); *Večernji list* which was privatized at the end of 1990s and according to its content and format, it is usually characterized as a semi-tabloid (Kanižaj, 2006); and *24sata*, daily that is considered to be the only real tabloid in the Croatian market (Car and Andrijašević, 2012), and which is included only in the analysis of media reporting since 2005 when it was established.

British sample is based on the analysis of articles mentioning leaders and/or their parties published in two consecutive weeks in November during a leader’s first three years in office (Langer, 2011), while Yugoslav and Croatian sample is based on articles published during the week prior to the elections or appointment by which a leader came to power, and one week in

March during a leader's second and third year in office.² While this suggests that British sample captures only 'normal' periods (e.g. no campaigns), and Yugoslav and Croatian both politically intense and normal periods, the analysis of the latter sample showed that personalised reporting in intense periods was fairly similar to that in normal periods, so the datasets are deemed comparable.

Finally, the study aims to establish the average number of articles mentioning the leader per week and the ratio of the leader to party mentions (if an article mentioned both the leader and the party it was counted for both variables).³ Langer's (2011) study is based on the analysis of 5033 articles from *The Times*. This sample has been updated to include David Cameron through primary analysis of 453 articles from *The Times*,⁴ and the Yugoslav and Croatian data were based on the primary analysis of 2222 articles from the three daily newspapers. Second coder coded 300 articles from the primary analysis and the inter-coder reliability scores for variables aimed to capture the reference to leader and reference to party were 1.⁵

The first indicator, the average number of articles per week, is based on articles mentioning political leaders, hence it excludes articles mentioning only political parties (n=4486). The second indicator, ratio of leader to party mentions, draws on the full sample (n=7708).

Findings

The comparisons of the average number of articles mentioning the political leader per week (Figure 1), and the ratio of leader to party mentions in examined newspapers (Figure 2) point to several interesting findings.

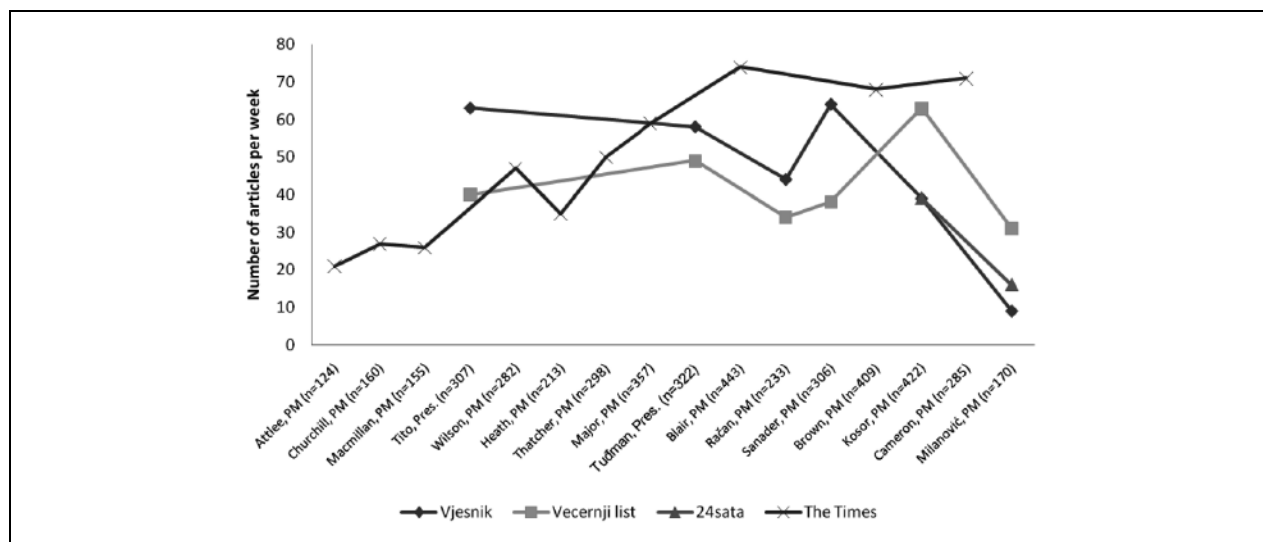


Figure 1. Average number of articles mentioning political leaders per week. PM stands for Prime Minister and Pres. for President indicating the political position that the head of the executive held while in power.

Source: Data for *The Times* updated from Langer (2011), all other data were collected by author ($n = 4486$).

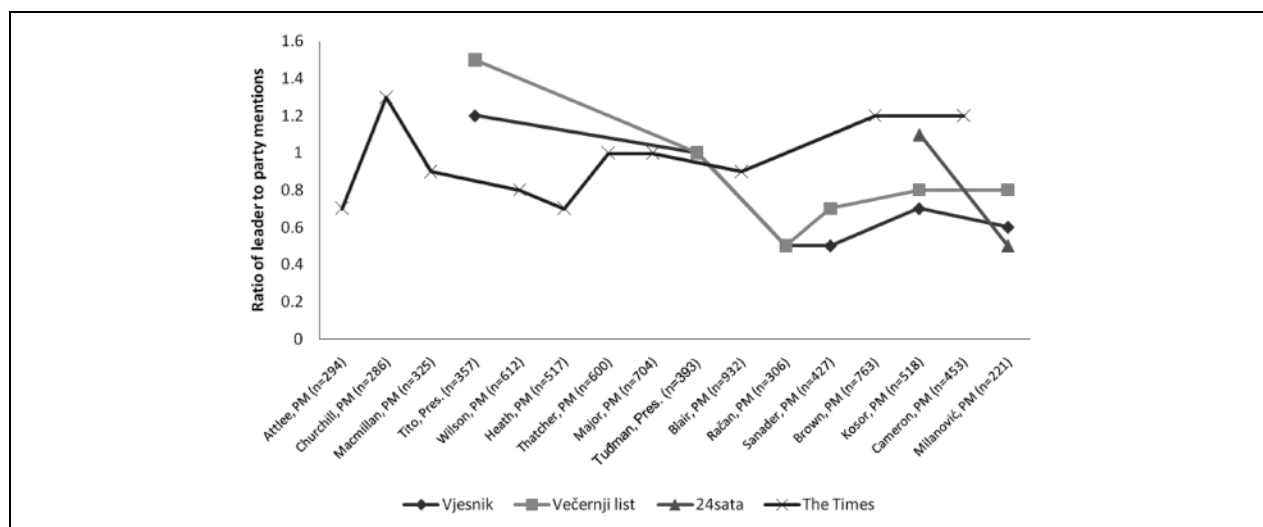


Figure 2. Ratio of articles mentioning political leaders to articles mentioning their party. PM stands for Prime Minister and Pres. for President indicating the political position that the head of the executive held while in power.

Source: Data for *The Times* updated from Langer (2011), all other data were collected by author ($n = 7708$).

First, it appears as though the transitional country and the established democracy experienced different trends in media reporting. Both indicators show that in the post-war period

political leaders became more media prominent in the UK media and that these leaders have over time become more media visible than their parties, which is the opposite trend to that found in the study of Yugoslav and Croatian media. In other words, while the example of *The Times* suggests that the United Kingdom experienced a personalization trend in media reporting (Pearson's coefficient for *The Times* in Figure 1 is .83, while in figure 2 it is .43), the analysis of Croatian newspapers points to the fact that this media has undergone a process of de-personalization in media reporting during the period of democratic transition (Pearson's coefficients for Croatian newspapers in Figure 1 vary from -1 to .07, while in Figure 2 they vary from -1 to -.84). Although Langer (2011) concluded that 'parties continue to play a crucial material and symbolic role in British politics' given that the increase in the mediated visibility of the British Prime Ministers relative to their parties was not drastic, the comparison with a transitional democracy reveals that the parties in the United Kingdom have a decreasingly important place in public discourse, while in the transitional context they might be gaining relevance by increased visibility in the mediated public sphere (p. 79).

Second, there seems to be a difference between the 'Western' and the communist style of reporting, at least as far as the focus on political leaders is concerned. Specifically, both indicators suggest that the communist papers in general put more emphasis on their leader in media content than in the Western countries in the period 1945 to 1990. None of the British Prime Ministers were more media visible in *The Times* than was Tito in the Yugoslav quality paper *Vjesnik* (Figure 1). In addition, during this period, only Wilson and Thatcher were slightly more frequently mentioned in *The Times* than was Tito in the Yugoslav half-tabloid *Večernji list* (Figure 1). Similarly, none of the British Prime Ministers was as prominent when compared to his or her party during this period, as was Tito when compared to the The League of Communists of Yugoslavia in the quality paper *Vjesnik*. Furthermore, only Churchill, who Langer (2011) says

was ‘considered in many regards as above party politics’, was similarly visible vis-à-vis his party as was Tito in the half-tabloid *Večernji list* (p. 77). In other words, only Churchill was more media visible than his party in the United Kingdom from 1945 to 1990, while Tito was more visible than The League of Communist of Yugoslavia in both communist papers. The results of this comparison run counter to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) expectations of the news values in Western and communist countries. They speculated that Western countries would pursue a more person-centred style of reporting, while a communist press would put more focus on structures and collectives. However, the comparison presented above suggests the opposite – that the Yugoslav communist press used a more person-centred reporting style than that in the United Kingdom. This finding then seems to better resonate with the theories related to communist leadership cults and Western scholarship on personalization. Specifically, Tito's high media prominence in communism might be connected with a deferential journalistic culture in which journalists were instructed to communicate information about him via mass media. This can be seen as one of the techniques of communist cult building (Apor et al., 2004; Lauk, 2008; Plamper, 2004; Rees, 2004). Whereas, the personalization scholarship suggests that (Western) media were in the past focused on issues and collectives, while nowadays this has changed towards more emphasis on the individual (Langer, 2011; Maier and Adam, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005), and this seems to fit with the development of personalized reporting in the United Kingdom.

Third, it seems that transitional media reporting could be far less personalized than is usually considered in the existing literature. For example, Lewis (2000) claimed that the post-communist politics revolve around individuals, while Örnebring (2012) declared that ‘many trends present in ‘Western’ political systems are even more pronounced in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe’, personalization being one of them (p. 500). However, as the

comparison of the Croatian and the UK media reporting shows, UK newspaper was pursuing a more leader-centred approach to reporting in the majority of the post-1990 period. Specifically, while the media visibility of Croatian parties increased in the post-communist period in all newspapers, the parties' visibility in the United Kingdom during this period decreased to the point that Brown and Cameron's ratios of leader-to-party mentions were similar to those of Tito in Yugoslav papers in the 1970s. In addition, even the Croatian tabloid has not put as much focus on the leader in comparison to the party as did *The Times* from the end of the 2000s. Furthermore, in the post-1990 period *The Times* has continually been publishing more articles about British leaders than any of the examined Croatian newspapers have published about their heads of the executive. Actually, in the post-2000 period *The Times* was mentioning the head of the executive in more articles per week than did the Yugoslav communist media in the 1970s. The biggest differences can be observed in the 2010s when *The Times* was publishing on average 71 articles about Cameron per week, while *Večernji list* was mentioning Milanović in less than half as many (n=31) and *Vjesnik* almost nine times fewer than *The Times* (n=9).

It might be tempting to ascribe the differences between the United Kingdom, Yugoslav and Croatian newspapers' reporting to their format and type. Specifically, it might be expected that *The Times* has, as a quality paper, focused most on reporting politics, and consequently perhaps, political leaders. However, two facts suggest that the differences in observed trends should not be seen as a result of the newspapers' format and type. First, a quality paper was analyzed in the Yugoslav and Croatian case as well, and its degree of leader-centred reporting and trends over time are significantly different from those observed in *The Times*. Hence, the comparison of only quality papers also points to the fact that politicians have become increasingly visible in the UK media, while their visibility has decreased in the Croatian media. Secondly, all Croatian newspapers, the quality paper, half-tabloid and the tabloid, have

experienced similar trends. Hence, the de-personalization trend is not characteristic only of a specific newspaper type but also of Croatian print media in general. Therefore, the differences between the development of personalized reporting in the three examined contexts should not be seen as stemming from differences in analysed materials.

In sum, the comparison of personalized media reporting in transitional, post-communist Croatia and the United Kingdom, an established democracy, points to the fact that the de-personalization of media reporting found during the transitional process from the communist to a post-communist system might be seen as an extraordinary trend in modern political communication.

Implications of the de-personalization process

In light of the mainstream personalization theory and the evidence that supports the leader-centred hypothesis in some established democracies, the findings gathered by the examination of the Yugoslav and Croatian media seem counter-intuitive. Specifically, while it appears as though politicians are becoming more and more media visible in established democracies, transitional democracy experienced a completely different trend. This has several important implications that need to be considered.

First, it has been suggested that European transitional democracies have been quite susceptible to Western influences during the process of democratization, especially those from the United States. However, the data gathered in this project refutes the *Americanization* theory; at least as far as the adoption of leader-centred media reporting is concerned, since the reporting in the transitional context did not become more personalized over time, but rather less. Although it is impossible to generalize and claim that all post-communist countries have not imported a personalized style of reporting politics from the US, or Western democracies in general, the

evidence from Croatia calls for caution in making generalizations about the Western influences on new democracies. It could actually be the case that the transitional countries have not relied as much on the American or Western communication practices as is often assumed. The reluctance of post-communist journalists to adopt Western-like practices of reporting has been documented in other areas of communication as well. For example, it is argued that journalists in post-communist societies retained their focus on comment and analysis rather than reporting, that is, they are described as opinionated, interventionist, prone to showing partisanship (Coman, 2000; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Lauk, 2009; Voltmer, 2008). As Gross (2004) puts it, 'From Albania to Serbia, post-1989 journalism consists of tendentious, opinionated, highly politicized, and often inaccurate reporting' (p. 123). In contrast, 'Western journalists are generally less supportive of any active promotion of particular values, ideas and social change, and they adhere more to universal principles in their ethical decisions' (Hanitzsch et al., 2011: 273). Hence, the *Americanization* theory does not seem to be able to explain the developments in some reporting practices in European transitional democracy.

Second, some of those scholars who question the explanatory power of the *Americanization* theory tend to subscribe to the *modernization* hypothesis. However, this theory likewise does not seem to be able to explain the de-personalization trend observed in Croatia. On the contrary, it seems that the more changes the country underwent, the less focus its media put on the political leaders and the more prominence was given to parties. Specifically, as the post-communist country moved towards the consolidation phase of the democratization process, liberalized its media market and built its civil society, the media have not put more focus on individual political actors, as would be expected according to modernization theory, but rather less. This calls into question not only the ability to apply modernization theory beyond the Western world but also the explanation of what are considered to be modern trends of political

communication. Personalization is usually considered to be one of those trends, alongside tabloidization, rise of infotainment, professionalization of journalists and campaigning, and so on (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). However, as the example of Croatia shows, tabloidized media do not have to practice person-centred media reporting, and party-centred reporting and decreased leaders' media visibility might be considered as new trends in mediated political communication. Given that this type of reporting is usually considered to be superior to personalized reporting, at least by the supporters of the party democracy (Langer, 2011; Manin, 1997), it seems that the post-communist country's media reporting trends resemble those that advocates of party democracy would like to see in established Western democracies. Ironically perhaps, if we consider that Western countries and their media systems were thought of as role models for new post-communist democracies (Gross, 2004; Lauk, 2009), these young democracies might in their consolidated phases actually be role-models for their older counterparts.

Finally, the theory suggested in this article, that of *continuation* of communist media reporting practices in the transitional era, is as incapable of explaining the de-personalization trends as *Americanization* and *modernization*. In spite of what can be seen as a favourable context for the continuation of communist practice of leader-centred reporting, post-communist media content transformed from leader-centred to party-centred. Although it is impossible to generalize based on this study, there is a possibility that the development of trends in post-communist reporting might be better explained by a process of *democratization* rather than any other theory. Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis, which aimed to determine the factors which were explicitly connected with detected de-personalization of media reporting, revealed that the lower degrees of leader-centred reporting in the late period of democratization were primarily associated with the rise in the autonomy of media and heads of the executive who held a position of a Prime Minister.⁶ These factors can also be seen as related to the democratization

process. In the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic society, the degree of media freedom rose, and institutional settings to de-centralize and de-personalize power, such as the change from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary political system, were introduced in order to prevent a rise of another all-powerful leader, as was Tito, and to an extent Tudman in the early post-communist period. Hence, the rise in media independence, and institutional changes by which Prime Ministers became head executives, can be seen as processes related to both democratization and the decreased focus on heads of the executive in media reporting. Although it is only possible to speculate about the causal connection between democratization and de-personalization of reporting at this point, the *democratization* theory in comparison to *Americanization* and *modernization* theory does seem to be the most plausible explanation of why the de-personalizing trend developed in the transitional context.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to empirically explore the theories advocated in the communist leadership cult literature and that concerned with democratic transitions which suggest that the mediated political communication in authoritarian, communist and transitional, post-communist systems was and is significantly centred on political leaders. Additionally, this paper aimed to explore how similar or different are ways in which personalized mediated communication might develop in authoritarian, transitional and established democratic contexts, and the extent to which mainstream personalization scholarship can help explain the ways in which leader-centred media reporting develops during the process of democratic transition.

The comparison of the data related to personalized media reporting from Yugoslavia and Croatia with that from the United Kingdom from 1945 to 2015 showed that the trends observed in the transitional context are counter to the existing personalization scholarship, and that they

run in the opposite direction from trends found in established Western democracies. While there is evidence that in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and France, the media have over the past few decades increased their focus on individual political actors at the expense of political collectives, this exploratory study revealed a strong de-personalization trend in the transitional context, meaning that the visibility of parties grew relative to that of their leaders. Hence, it was suggested that the de-personalization of media reporting manifested in the greater focus on collective political actors, as compared to individual ones, might represent a new trend in political communication, with transitional countries perhaps being among the first ones to experience this trend. This might be an especially plausible hypothesis if the development of the de-personalization trend in the transitional context can be best explained by the *democratization* theory. Since the theories of *Americanization* and *modernization* do not seem to be able to explain the de-personalization trend in the transitional context, it was suggested that the explanation for this trend should be looked for in the process of *democratization*, the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system and all the changes that come with it, that is, the de-centralization of power, liberalization of media markets, development of the civil society, and so on. However, further comparative research in other European young democracies, and other transitional societies, would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

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NOTES

¹ Tito was the Yugoslav head executive from 1945 until his death in 1980. The only European communist leader who ruled longer than Tito was Albanian Enver Hoxha.

² Exceptions were made in cases of Josip Broz Tito and Franjo Tuđman whose first years in office were not included in the analysis. In the case of Tito, the decision was made not to include the first years in office since the material (newspapers archive) was not available for these years (1945-1948). Instead, the year in which Tito was appointed President for Life (1974) was chosen as the first year of analysis, since two newspapers' archives were available from this point in time. The second exception was made in relation to Franjo Tuđman who acted as the President of Croatia since 1990, but Croatia did not formally declare independence until 1991, so the 1992 presidential elections can be seen as the first formal elections in the independent state. Therefore, the last week of the 1992 presidential campaign was included as representative of Tuđman's first year in office.

³ The variable which coded for the mention of leader's party had to be coded in intense political coverage in the Yugoslav and Croatian case, since this dataset is part of a larger study which also analysed Croatian Presidents' mediated visibility, and in the post-2000 period the Presidents had to resign from all party duties once elected so it was impossible to research leader to party mentions in the normal coverage (second and third year in office). Consequently, Yugoslav and Croatian leader to party ratio indicator is based on the articles published during the intense, rather than normal periods (a week of election coverage prior to elections in which the leader came to power).

⁴ Analysis for David Cameron has been carried out following Langer's (2011) research design, but captured leaders' first two, rather than three years in office.

⁵ Inter-coder reliability score was calculated according to Holsti's (1969) method of agreement - $2A / (N1+N2)$ - whereas A is the number of units in which coders agree and N1 and N2 are the number of units coded by each of the coders.

⁶ This analysis is not reported in the article. The fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis analyzed the degree of leader-centred media reporting as the outcome, while causal conditions tested in the analysis were the type of the political system and electoral system, the position that the leader holds in the political system (President or Prime Minister), whether or not the leader is a party leader and head of the executive, the degree to which the media system is commercialized, and the degree to which journalistic culture can be seen as autonomous.